

# The Strange Cases of Magnum, Scientific Consultant

By  
Max Rittenberg

(Copyright, 1915.)  
"ST you five thousand," snapped Magnum brusquely.

"Five thousand pounds for a consulting fee!" exclaimed his visitor.

"No, not pounds—guineas."

"But that's preposterous!"

Magnum pointedly turned his back and called loudly through an open door into his range of private laboratories:

"Got that combustion analysis finished?"

From twenty yards a diffident, almost inaudible voice murmured something about "only the weighing of the CO<sub>2</sub> bulbs."

"Hurry!" shouted Magnum, and then turned again to his prospective client with rather the air of a schoolmaster about to demonstrate an elementary proposition in geometry for the fifteenth time to a particularly dense dunderhead.

Magnum knew his own value as a scientific consultant, and had none of the usual scientist's modesty about him. His manner was brusque and rough-edged to the point of boorishness, and no one would have put up with such incivility had it not been for his infernal cleverness in his special field. In the City of London he stood as the undisputed head of his profession. In age he was anywhere from forty to fifty; in appearance he was lean and wiry and as hard as nails, with a straggling mustache and short beard of a sandy red, and a huge bald head covered with knobs and bumps like the bare, stony summit of a kopje. He acknowledged no front name—called and signed himself Magnum, like a peer or prince. He was a bachelor with a dwelling place somewhere on the Plumstead marshes.

Turning to his visitor, Sir Julian Boyd, he sketched out the situation with a series of taps on the table from the horn spatula he held in his hand:

"You and your family are suffering from a mysterious form of poisoning. You've consulted doctors and they can't place it. You've had the water analyzed, the milk analyzed, the whole of your food analyzed. Nothing found wrong with them. Meanwhile you're all tied up with these gastric pains—"

Sir Julian did at that moment wince and pass his hand feelingly over his ample lower waistcoat.

"And if you don't trace the source of the trouble, you'll soon be ordering your coffins. If it's not worth five thousand guineas to you to have the problem cleared up, you put a cheap value on your health."

"But would you guarantee to solve the mystery?"

"If the problem's solvable, I'll solve it. If I take up your case, my reputation's at stake. What better guarantee could you have?" demanded Magnum truculently.

Sir Julian caved in before this brusque authoritativeness. "Very well," said he. "I put the case in your hands."

Magnum passed him pen and ink. "Cross the check to my bank—Coutts," he replied, for he made it a business rule to get his fees in advance.

Sir Julian Boyd's town house occupied a most desirable position facing Hyde Park. It was one of the very few houses in Park Lane which are detached and surrounded by a garden. In the buying of it, he had had a spirited auction duel with a Cardiff colliery owner who also wanted the site for his town residence. Boyd, bringing up financial guns from the Kimberley diamond field, had beaten him down and erected a splendid mansion.

Magnum drove there in the evening with the young fellow whose diffident voice had answered something about "CO<sub>2</sub> bulbs." This young Welshman—Iver Meredith by name—was his chief's right hand. Magnum himself was the organizing brain and the commercial acumen of the firm, but he was too hasty of temperament to be fitted for the detailed work of scientific analysis, which requires the manual technique of a virtuoso pianist and the patience of a lace worker.

The young fellow was very shy, very modest, very diffident—stammering and stuttering if he had to speak to a client, and blushing horribly if he had to make conversation with a woman. He looked up to Magnum as a master, a protector, and a being of immeasurable powers.

The taxi conveying them arrived at Sir Julian's house when the family—husband, wife, two grown-up daughters a nearly grown-up son—were at dinner.

"Ask Mr. Magnum to wait in the library for a quarter of an hour," said Boyd to his butler. "Give him the evening papers."

"Tell Sir Julian that I must see

him at once," said Magnum to the butler.

Boyd came to the library, dusting some bread crumbs off his ample waistcoat, decidedly on his dignity at this ill-mannered interruption.

"What is this important matter?" he demanded.

"I want you and your family to leave the house now," returned Magnum authoritatively.

"We're in the middle of dinner."

"I know. So much the better. Leave the meal as it is and go off to some hotel."

"Unheard of!"

"But not impossible."

"You presume, sir!"

"When I take up a case, I expect a free hand. I want an empty house, left just as it is. The servants are to parade before me, and then go off at once. Your family are to follow, after they've made suitable packing arrangements."

"Leave the house empty?"

"Yes. You're insured against burglary, I suppose?"

"Of course."

"Then where's the difficulty?"

"It's unheard of."

"So is your poisoning problem. An unheard-of case requires unheard-of methods."

Sir Julian was impressed, in spite of his annoyance at being interrupted in the middle of a sacred meal.

"Leave for how long?" he asked.

"Say a week. I may be able to solve the problem in a day, but it'll be safer to say a week."

"I'll consult with my wife," conceded Boyd, and presently, like a shepherd with his flock, he returned with his wife and family.

Young Boyd, trailing mutinously behind, eyed Magnum with considerable hostility, found the return gaze disconcerting, and switched his look of displeasure on to Meredith, who wilted under it.

Sir Julian made a cursory introduction of visitors to family, and Lady Boyd took the word, explaining symptoms and suspicions at great length. She was a thin, colorless little woman, with a thin, colorless voice that went trailing on interminably like a lump of insipid sweet stuff pulled out by a butter-cream machine. An ounce of fact served with her to make a whole soup tureen of conversation. Distilling out the ounce of fact, it amounted to this:

Gastric pains, dizziness and sick headache on awakening in the morning. Varied most erratically, being sometimes very severe and necessitating a day or two in bed, and at other times slight and transitory. At the present time there was a lull.

Next week it might be virulent again. Attacked all the members of the family, but none of the servants, with the one exception of the housekeeper. Applied only to the house—when they went elsewhere the trouble vanished.

"Then why not give up the house?" Magnum had interjected.

Young Boyd perked up at this suggestion, but indignation depicted itself on the countenance of Sir Julian and Lady Boyd. She explained lengthily that the idea was unthinkable. Continuing with the facts:

Analysis had given a clean bill of health to the water, the milk and all the food examined. She had tried changing the milkman, the grocer, and the baker. She had dismissed several of the servants. Still the disturbing symptoms continued.

"The wine?" queried Magnum.

"It was all of well-known brands. Similarly with the liquors."

"Tea and coffee?"

Had also been analyzed.

The two Misses Boyd began to eye the shy young Meredith. Seeing him blushing, they continued the ocular attacks with minx-like maliciousness. He edged around behind Magnum, his pillar of protection.

The butler knocked and entered to announce that the servants were now ready to depart. Magnum strode out to the hall, where they were lined up in strict order of precedence, beginning with the prim housekeeper and ending with the "twenny" and the boot boy. Each had his or her bag or package of clothes to take away. Magnum, impervious to hostile looks, went through every package to make sure that nothing suspicious was being carried away from the house. Then he dismissed them, with the exception of the prim housekeeper, whom he wished to cross-examine.

Her symptoms, as she described them, corresponded closely to the family symptoms. She suspected that some one had a grudge against the family and wanted to poison them all.

"Who?" demanded Magnum.

She would rather not say, sir.

"Speak out," thundered Magnum.

Well, sir, the second housemaid had had a "follower," a soldier, whom Lady Boyd disapproved of. She thought perhaps—

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## The Cyanogen Affair

"Rubbish!" said Magnum contemptuously, and dismissed her.

The family went to make their own packing arrangements, and Sir Julian telephoned to a Piccadilly hotel to engage rooms and have a commissionaire sent to see to their trunks.

Meanwhile, Magnum's waiting taxi had been ticking up twopences with great satisfaction to the chauffeur.

Magnum, who never bothered him-

self with details of that kind, now

sent young Meredith with a handful

of loose silver to settle the bill and

bring in their own portmanteaus. He

had prepared for their spending a

week in the Park Lane house.

By eleven o'clock, the mansion was

empty save for Magnum and his as-

stant, left with a full set of keys.

They examined the house from cellar

to roof, Magnum striding ahead

and jingling the bunch of housekeeper's

keys, Meredith following with eyes

fixed more on his chief than on the

articles examined. He was content

to leave the thinking end of the

work to Magnum and let his own

mind run follow until some definite

analytical task were assigned to him.

They investigated pantries and cellars,

gas-supply, water-supply, electric-light

and electric-power arrangements. Magnum

was naturally gifted with an inordinately

keen sense of smell. In his early days, before

he had started out as a scientific consultant

and was merely a university post-graduate

student, he had written a monograph on odors.

He employed his sense of smell on

every food substance in the house,

including the remnants of the Boyd

meal, which by his orders had been

allowed to remain in statu quo.

Meredith watched him with implicit

faith in his powers of deduction; but

Magnum frowned disgustedly as test

after test gave him no clue to the

mystery. He had hoped to earn his

five thousand guineas by a couple of

hours' work, and then to spend a

lavish week in the Boyd mansion for

the sake of appearances.

Now, the mystery seemed by no

means simple. They might have to

analyze hundreds of foods and drinks.

Magnum adjourned to the library,

where he threw coals on the dying

fire, worked it up to a cheerful blaze,

and drew up an armchair to the

hearth in order to discuss the prob-

lem in comfort. Seeing Sir Julian's

cigar, burying himself deep in

thought.

An hour later, he roused himself

suddenly, found the patient Meredith

dozing, and shook him awake.

"What did you make of the house-

keeper?" demanded Magnum.

"I didn't notice her much," con-

fessed the young fellow.

"Booby!" growled Magnum, poked

them furiously, and lay down to rest

on an improvised couch in the laboratory.

When he awoke in the morning, he

swore vehemently. His head was

quite clear. There were no internal

pains. The cigars were innocent.

But if food, drink and smokes could

be eliminated from the mystery of the

Boyd mansion, what in thunder was

the cause of the sickness and pains?

The atmosphere of the library or

bedrooms: that must be it. Something

poisonous in the air of the

house.

"Bring along globes for air sam-

ples," he called to Meredith, and the

latter obediently vacuumized a dozen

large glass globes with airtight taps.

Back at the Boyd house, deserted

and looking horribly neglected with

its litter in the dining-room and

kitchen, its burned-down fires, its un-

made beds and its still curtained win-

dows, Magnum began to sniff atmo-

sphere with a ferocious intensity of

purpose, like a wolf scenting the

wind. Nothing peculiar tanged his

keen sense of smell. He then ordered

McFidelity to expose a couple of

globes in the library, another in the

dining-room, two others in the bed-

rooms belonging to the family and to

the housekeeper. They returned with

their atmospheric booty to the labora-

tories in Upper Thames Street.

Magnum kept a show office in

Queen Victoria street, near to the

Mansion House, for the benefit of clients.

When they entered it, they were

invariably told by a solitary

clerk that Mr. Magnum was away at

his laboratories or elsewhere. Then

the client would be handed a card